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ABSTRACT

This report examines the collaborative program between Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) and the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia (UVA). The program began in 1997 and was designed to encourage PVCC students, particularly minority and other nontraditional students, to participate in the Introduction to Teaching course at PVCC and then to transfer to the Curry School's 5-year teacher education program. The Curry School requires completion of an undergraduate degree in liberal arts and a master of teaching degree. It was envisioned that each year approximately 15 students would enroll in the program at PVCC, and that the majority of those students would transfer. However, it has proved more difficult to recruit and retain students in the program. This report suggests that retention factors include mentoring, the desire to teach, and internal motivation. Withdrawal factors include confusion about requirements, feeling isolated, and desire to focus solely on completing an undergraduate degree. Success for transfer students often involves finding a niche or a role that offers the student a sense of purpose. Thus, the support of cohort groups like the PVCC program members can be of critical importance in a large program at a university. (NB)

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Research Report No. 10-2001
December 2001

Piedmont Virginia Community College
Charlottesville, Virginia

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Executive Summary

The following report describes a collaborative program between Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) and the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia (UVA) that began in 1997: "The Teaching Fellows Partnership: An Alliance Between Piedmont Virginia Community College and the University of Virginia." The program is also described in the current issue of *Inquiry: The Journal of Virginia Community Colleges* (6:2, Fall 2001).

This program was funded by a grant from the Philip Morris Corporation as part of a national initiative, "Extending the Bridge: Community Colleges and the Road to Teaching." The lack of minority students entering the teaching profession was (and still is) a concern of policy makers examining issues in the teaching profession, and the goal of this national initiative was to attract non-traditional students enrolled in community colleges to transfer into four- or five-year teacher education programs. The grant included provisions for stipends for PVCC students who were selected to participate in the introductory education course held at PVCC; once students were admitted to the Curry School they were to receive financial assistance with tuition. Additionally, the grant provided for funds for ordering books and related educational materials for the PVCC library in the field of education, an area the library had not had the opportunity previously to expand.

The program ran from 1997 through 2000 with 10 students enrolled each year in the *Introduction to Teaching* course at PVCC that was taught by a Curry School faculty member. Two students from the initial cohort graduated in May 2001 from the Curry School's five-year teacher education program, and one will graduate in May of 2002. Seven students from the third cohort successfully transferred, two have chosen to graduate from the University without

completing the five-year program, and five presently intend on completing the program in May 2003. Because funds remained at the end of the initial three-year period allocated for the grant, after a year's hiatus, the *Introduction to Teaching* course is once again being offered at PVCC in the fall of 2001 with the intention that another cohort of students will successfully apply to the Curry School program.

At the time the grant was written and funded, it was envisioned that each year approximately 15 students would enroll in the program at PVCC, and that the majority of these would successfully transfer to the Curry School. In fact, it has proven to be more of a challenge than anticipated to successfully recruit a cohort of interested students at PVCC; additionally, issues related to retention of these students in the Curry School have also arisen. As the following report illustrates, mentoring and advising of students is key to maintaining their progress. In part a response to addressing the needs of these students, the Curry School created a transfer group that meets for lunch and discussion regularly. The students who have maintained their academic study in the program have done extremely well, and the report also discusses their progress. A student in the first cohort received the Outstanding Master of Teaching award at graduation in May 2001and has been profiled in several UVA publications; at least four other students have also received academic recognition in the Curry School.

Introduction

My two [advanced] classes are going well so far (I just knocked wood). They are both hard theory classes so with each successful test score I am starting to think I'm going to be a teacher after all. It's really strange to think that my dream may come true.

--second-year transfer student

The current shortage of teachers in Virginia as well as throughout the country is sparking a variety of initiatives to increase the pool of qualified applicants for positions in state schools. In the fall of 1999 the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) established a task force to examine issues central to the role of the community colleges related to identifying and preparing students to transfer to four- or five-year programs of teacher preparation. Since then, the VCCS Teacher Preparation Task Force has organized statewide meetings and colloquia that have resulted in plans to encourage further development of preservice coursework in community colleges (Smith, 2000).

Once the paths are established for community college students to follow if they choose to enter teaching, a need exists to facilitate and monitor the students' progress as they enter and complete preservice teacher education programs. While the literature addresses issues related to the transfer of students from two year to four-year institutions, the specific needs of preservice student transfers are just beginning to be identified (Farbman, 2001). This report discusses a collaboration between Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) and the Curry School of Education's five-year

teacher education program based on three years of program implementation, using student feedback to identify issues that were found relevant each year of the program. The report then focuses on factors critical to retention, issues leading to dropouts, includes profiles of the graduates, and concludes with suggestions for the future expansion of such programs.

Background

The Teaching Fellows Program began in the fall of 1997 as a collaboration between PVCC and the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia to facilitate the transfer of community college students into Curry's five-year teacher education program. The Teaching Fellows Program is sponsored by a grant from the Philip Morris Company as part of a national initiative to attract non-traditional students into the teaching profession. PVCC students apply to the program, and once accepted, they receive a financial stipend for the year they are enrolled in the program; this stipend is also awarded if they successfully transfer to the University of Virginia. As part of the program, students enroll in a two-semester course, *Introduction to Teaching*, at PVCC, which is taught by a Curry School faculty member, and receive credit for this when they are admitted to the teacher education program in the Curry School (Wilson, 2000).

The admissions process for the Curry School of Education's teacher education program is two-step: students first apply to the University of Virginia and then to the

Curry School of Education. When students successfully complete the teacher education program, they graduate with both a Bachelor of Arts degree in a content area, as well as a Master of Teaching degree from the Curry School.

As the instructor in the *Introduction to Teaching* course at PVCC, I have met with the transfer students regularly since the fall of 1998 when the first cohort of PVCC students transferred to the Curry School. These meetings have been both formal and informal, and feedback from the students over this period forms the basis for the discussion of factors key to program retention and completion: I have interviewed the students yearly, and have also gathered written documentation periodically from them about their perceptions of the program.

Transitional Stages

The discussion of transitional stages that follows is based on observations and feedback from the Teaching Fellows students who have transferred into the Curry School Teacher Education Program since the fall of 1998. The students' first year at the University of Virginia and in the Curry School is the third year of the five-year program sequence required to earn both a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Teaching degree. The discussion of Year One is based on three classes (cohorts) of entering students, Year Two reflects the sentiments of two cohorts of students, and Year Three reflects one cohort.

- **Year One : Overwhelming**

As each group of students entered Curry, they reported similar feelings of being overwhelmed by the complexities related to the process. First of all there is the environment. "I'd gotten used to the smaller environment at PVCC and UVA was overwhelming" was an observation they all made. Secondly, there is the very real issue of confusion about course requirements. "It can drive you crazy signing up for courses when you are not sure what you're supposed to do" and "the process of clarifying required courses is overwhelming" are comments illustrative of students' reactions during the first few months of school. As one student said, "What did not sink in for me was the whole idea of scheduling—that there would be classes held only in the evening, or that large parts of the coursework would be done off grounds. I later realized that this logistical stuff was what required much time and additional effort over a more traditional straight liberal arts type of study." Additionally, the use of email as the primary form of communication at UVA certainly posed problems initially for all students. Finally, it was during this first year of transfer (which is the equivalent of the third year at the University) that several students decided not to continue in the Curry School and instead to complete their course requirements for a B.A. degree in the College of Arts and Sciences.

- **Year Two: Reality Hits**

"This is where the rubber hit the road for me...I think balancing the load of the B.A. degree and the ed school is where the program really gets tough," commented one student. Once the students successfully completed their first year, they feel prepared to

navigate the remaining challenges. "I feel fine about my decision to transfer, but now have concerns about juggling the demands of the ed courses with those of the college" is a frequent comment. The one student who left the university completely did so during the second year, and the only other issue noted by students in this year had to do with age. As one student noted, "The most difficult thing for me was the isolation I felt as an older student." However, this student went on to note that she did find a core group of students taking the same college classes she was and an overlapping group taking the same education classes: "They all were much younger, but our interests provided a base for companionship, if not friendship...and of course, there still was the transfer group."

- **Year Three : Almost There**

The two students who graduated in May 2001 were both offered several teaching contracts and felt satisfied with their overall preparation for the future. As one of them noted:

> It's a cycle (this whole process)...my first year here I felt like an outsider or a loser and did not anticipate this would happen...[Now] I can't walk down the street without someone honking or offering me a ride, or be in the computer lab without being approached for advice on any number of subjects. I am also amazed at how I have been able to adapt to managing a much larger workload without losing my cool. The papers that posed such a challenge two or three years ago roll easily from brain to fingers to computer without a lot of pain and stress.

The second graduating student echoed these sentiments, saying, "I have felt prepared to handle the challenges related to this decision. I am glad to have had a chance to complete this program." These students obviously feel the process was a worthwhile

one and are glad they persevered, while at the same time acknowledging the route to completion wasn't always smooth.

Retention Factors

As the previous discussion shows, the cycle of issues faced by these transfer students varies, and in order to help them navigate obstacles that might keep them from achieving their goals, it is crucial to identify places where students may become overwhelmed. Based on the past three years this program has been in effect, three factors have emerged which can be linked to student retention in the program: *mentoring*, *the desire to teach*, and *internal motivation*.

- **Mentoring**

All the students who remained in the program refer to the importance of their peer group and of formal and informal meetings. One of the graduates spoke of the "strong bond" of the transfer students over the three years and said she hoped there would always be a cohort of these students going through the program on a yearly basis. Another said she could not emphasize enough the importance of having the mentoring group through this process. "The transfer student group formed the core of peers that enabled me to move socially into the larger group of students in my class, and that first year I stuck like glue to my [transfer] cohort," she added.

- **The desire to teach**

Students' comments that reflect this factor include " [In spite of the problems] I know I want to teach" and "I know I want to teach. Period. That is how I hope to grow as a person." Over the past three years, the students consistently reflected on their coursework and how it helped them attain their goals. Time and again, they repeated, "this is why I'm here, and I'm determined to stick it out."

- **Internal motivation**

It is more difficult to qualify this factor; however, when students talk about their desire to stay in the program many of their responses reflect strong internal motivation. One student said, "the credit load seems unfair, and for me it was a very bad dream, but I have adapted," reflecting the intent to complete the program. Another student said, "I am glad to have made this decision and am thankful for the teaching fellowship program as I think it gave me focus and pushed me along towards my goal." And a slightly different aspect of what it means to be internally motivated to complete the program is reflected in this student's response:

> You have to be willing to work with people. This means not only putting up with others' quirks and foibles but also being willing to show others one's own dark side. I have made LOTS of mistakes in my dealings with students and teachers. It's embarrassing, but it's part of the learning process and I wonder if part of why some of the other students dropped out was because they felt overwhelmed by their own mistakes and near-failures.

The concern shown by this student about others leaving the program reflects the sense of cohesiveness felt by the students in the program, and it has been shared in different ways by other students as well during the past three years.

Withdrawal Factors

For this discussion of 'dropouts,' it should be noted that at this time only one student has completely left the University and the Curry School, and this was due in part to complications related to health problems. The other students who have 'dropped out' left the Curry School's program and had either already completed their requirements for a B.A. degree in the College of Arts and Sciences, or will do so by June of 2002. Three factors can be linked to the students who drop out of the Curry School: *confusion about requirements*, *feeling isolated*, and *a desire to focus solely on completing an undergraduate degree in the University's College of Arts and Sciences*.

- **Confusion about requirements**

All students complain about the complexities associated with juggling requirements of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Curry School of Education, but most eventually navigate these successfully. One student who chose to drop out of the Curry program said, "I was taken aback in my second week to find out that I was not enrolled in a required course...I know some of this disorganization and frustration led to my dropping out of the Curry School." Another student cited similar conflicts

between the course requirements of Curry School and Arts and Sciences as an issue, and it's undeniable that this poses extra challenges for students entering with transfer credits and attempting to complete two degrees successfully. Another reinforced these views by saying that "even though I did not continue in the teaching program I would suggest that transfer students in the future be informed about the course load in the College. Many students will be unaware of what they want to major in the college and some may not have taken prerequisite courses to major in what interests them most."

- **Feelings of isolation**

The students who left the Curry School's program reported feeling isolated, and they felt a lack of connection with the programs in both places (Curry and the College), while acknowledging that this is difficult to achieve. The students who left also found it more difficult to connect to advisors in both programs than did the ones who stayed. For these students, bridging the distance between the College and Curry represented more of a challenge than they had anticipated, and they felt that staying with one program would overcome these feelings of isolation.

- **The desire to complete an undergraduate degree in the College of Arts and Sciences**

As has already been noted, the preservice teacher education program in the Curry School requires completing requirements for an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts and requirements for the Master of Teaching degree, which takes five years. All of the students who have left the preservice teacher education program cited their

desire to complete a degree in the College of Arts and Sciences and then re-evaluate their educational goals. These students are enthusiastic about their studies, eager to do well, and plan on making decisions later about what to do after their graduation. Several have said that they intend to work for licensure and a graduate degree with the intention of teaching once they graduate.

Graduate Profiles

"I feel absolutely equipped to teach, and can tell I have received an education on education that is second to none," one student commented. As this student prepares to be one of the first to graduate from the PVCC-Curry School collaborative venture, it is clear that the journey has had a successful outcome. Of the two students graduating in May 2001, one was offered a teaching position several weeks into her student teaching placement and will continue teaching in that school in the fall; the second had job offers from several school systems in central Virginia but instead chose to accept a position in a civic child advocacy program. One of these students received the Outstanding Master of Teaching Award from the Curry School at graduation, the highest honor given in the class of over one hundred students. Both received scholarship awards during their time in the Curry SChool. The student who will graduate in May of 2002 has received funding as part of a national initiative to identify minority high school students who hope to become teachers and to make it possible for these students to have financial support as they prepare to enter the teaching profession.

Implications for the Future

The collaboration between PVCC and UVA was designed to attract non-traditional students into teaching (Table 1), and while it might be thought that the issues cited by students in this study are related to their own specific needs, the findings discussed here really reflect those of the larger pool of transfer students. In her study of the transition of community college transfer students to a four-year college, Patricia Harrison (2000) noted the importance of finding a niche for students in order to make the transition positive. Harrison defines a niche as "a role in university life from which a person derives a sense of purpose and self-esteem, generally including both a social and an academic component." The PVCC students who have successfully completed the transfer to UVA have established a niche for themselves in varied ways, leading to a sense of belonging and identification with their peers as well as within the teacher education program. These students cite the role of the peer support of their transfer cohorts as central to this process. One student's comments reflected the feelings of all of these students when she said, "My existing [transfer] network at Curry has unfailingly helped me through this process." Another student said, "And of course, there were always the others who had been in the Fellowship program with me...our connection through the Teaching Fellowship proved a strong bond."

For the students who transfer into a large, complicated program such as exists in the Curry School, it is critical to provide them with support and guidance, as well as to

establish a framework of peers who will be supportive. Another instance of the support of the cohort groups occurred this spring when one of the seven students who transferred in the fall of 2000 became critically ill, and the other students quickly formed an e-mail group to track her progress and to help with assignments and other necessary details while she was hospitalized. Additionally, when students thought of leaving the Curry School program, others would soon hear of it and stop by my office, encouraging me to meet with the students in question in hopes I might influence their decision. As of this writing (fall of 2001), several of the students currently in the fourth year of the program are having some problems with their coursework, and the whole group takes pains to update me about these struggles; in addition, the transfer lunches have been well-attended this fall, reflecting, in part, the students' commitment to the program.

Successful transfer of community college students into preservice teacher education programs certainly can, and should, take place. The benefits of expediting successful transfer of these students into teacher education programs are obvious. As programs such as the one described here continue to expand, the potential for increasing the pool of diverse and qualified teachers will strengthen. The following recommendations for future growth and development of transfer programs for preservice teachers hinge on various aspects of advising and mentoring:

1. The university and the education school need to continue to focus on intensive advising and clarifying of academic requirements beginning in the summer when students first transfer;

2. It is important to create and actively monitor a cohort group of transfer students for formal and informal support;

3. Individual progress should be monitored over the three years students are enrolled in the program.

These findings are similar to those reported in the large scale studies such as the National Study of Community College Career Corridors for K-12 Teacher Recruitment. Along with their recommendations for effective program implementation for preservice programs, the Recruiting New Teachers project has found a need for comprehensive articulation and joint admissions policies, formal introduction to four-(or five)-year institutions, adequate funding, and effective academic counseling/mentoring involving trained specialists to "help students navigate through requirements." (Farbman, 2001)

As Table 1 shows, the collaboration between PVCC and the Curry School has resulted in an increasing number of students transferring into the teacher education program. As the two institutions continue to build on the lessons learned from the implementation of this program, more students will be attracted to the teaching profession.

> *The whole process is a cycle; when I began I could not have imagined that I would be accepted into the teacher ed program the way I have... I know now that when my profession requires me again to master a new environment and new peer group that I can manage and that just because you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel it doesn't mean you shouldn't walk down it.*
>
> --graduating student

Table 1: Program participation as of June 2001

Year	Teaching Fellows enrolled at PVCC	Gender/ Race	Transfer to UVA and to Curry	Age	Student Retention At UVA	Students graduating from UVA and Curry
1997-1998	10/ 7 complete the two-semester course	5 African American females 3 white females 2 white males	4 applied 4 admitted	Range: 24-47 years old	3/4: 1 left due to illness	1 graduated from UVA 2 from Curry and UVA with B.A. and M.T. May '01
1998-1999	10/ 8 complete the two-semester course	3 African American females 3 white females 3 African American males 1 white male	5 apply 2 admitted	Range: 19-46 years old	2/2	1 graduated from UVA in May'01 and one will graduate from Curry and UVA May '02
1999-2000	11/ 10 complete the two-semester course	6 white females 2 white males 2 African American females 1 African American male	7 apply 7 admitted	Range: 21-45 years old	7/7	2 have transferred out of Curry; the other 5 will graduate with both degrees in May '03

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